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2024



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How to create an outdoor living retreat

Al fresco entertaining has taken off in recent years. It's much more common today to find homeowners who want to extend living spaces to the outdoors in meaningful ways that go beyond a few lawn chairs and a stand-alone grill. Dream backyard living rooms mirror similar spaces indoors and contain features like cozy corners, lush furniture and televisions or movie projectors. Plus, they often abut additional outdoor luxuries like fully functional kitchens.

Homeowners have various options when designing outdoor living spaces. Above all else, spaces should be created with the goal of encouraging people to get together. Here are some ideas.

Poolside retreat

Homeowners with pools and other water features likely want this area to be the star of the entertaining space. Furniture will be more of the lounging variety, with comfortable chaises and spots to catch the sun. If a swim-up bar isn't possible, a rolling bar cart can be stocked with essentials for cocktails or mocktails for the kids. Furniture near the pool will be exposed to a lot of sun, so look for durable, sun-resistant fabrics.

Fireside nook

Gathering around an outdoor fireplace or fire pit is a treat when the weather cools down. Mirror the look of the same setup indoors by arranging outdoor sofas so they flank the fireplace. Add some ottomans or side tables for stowing mulled cider or hot chocolate. A mantel above the fireplace can hold pots of greenery or candles that add to the ambiance.

Consider a custom banquette

Unused corners on a patio or rooftop retreat can utilize a custom-made banquette that provides the functionality of a sofa sectional outdoors. Have a contractor design it to the exact specifications of the area, and add a rug to ground the space.

Vary the flooring

Depending on the entertaining space, a balance of soft grass, pavers or other hardscape will be necessary. Certain areas will need to be hard enough for chairs and other furniture, particularly for those who are including an outdoor dining table in the design.



Create some privacy

Some homeowners are lucky enough to have natural barriers that offer privacy in their entertaining spaces. When there isn't enough, tall shrubs, inexpensive bamboo fencing or trellis can provide a blind that makes an outdoor living area more cozy and private. Consider placing tall, potted plants on rolling casters to improve privacy as the need arises.

Outdoor living spaces are all the rage, and they can add value and functionality to most any home.

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Maintaining a lawn routinely roamed by pets

Vibrant, green lawns can draw attention to any landscape. Many homeowners toil for hours each week to ensure their lawns are pristine, or invest in lawn care services to help maintain a yard if they do not have the time to do so themselves.

While many treatments can be applied to lawns to help them thrive, animal waste is not among them. Pet owners who aspire to have beautiful lawns will have to take a few extra steps to ensure lawns can persevere despite the presence of furry companions.

Reseed with a damage-resistant grass

There are many different types of grass, and some are more resilient than others. Tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and Bermuda grass are just some of the grass varieties that can capably handle pet traffic. If replacing the entire lawn is not possible, consider reseeding or addressing the areas that pets frequent.

Strengthen the root system

It may be tempting to cut the lawn short, particularly if dogs or

cats like to nibble on longer blades of grass. But that approach could be doing the lawn a disservice. According to The Home Depot, letting the lawn grow to at least three inches will help keep moisture in the soil and prevent evaporation. That moisture will strengthen the roots, creating a healthier lawn for pets and people.

Create pet paths

Various materials can be used in these high-traffic areas to minimize the sights and signs of pet traffic. Mulch or crushed stone can establish these pet highways and look like intended features.

Set boundaries

Pet urine contains high levels of nitrogen, which can burn grass and turn it brown. It's not possible to water down urine or pick up solid waste immediately every time a pet goes outdoors, so designate a pet-friendly spot for potty time. Use fencing or a dog run to separate this area and help mitigate "land mines" all over the lawn. Fencing also can keep pets out of vegetable gardens and away from potentially toxic plants.



Avoid chemical lawn treatments

When pets use the yard and rest on the lawn, you'll need to eliminate products that can be harmful to them. Choose all-natural fertilizers and weed and pest preventatives.

Look for alternatives

If maintaining a lawn with pets seems like an uphill battle, consider swapping out your landscape with a variety of materials. Scale back on

grass, and incorporate groundcover, hardscape materials like pea gravel, or extend the patio. Artificial turf also is an option, as it won't brown and wither. Some turf products can even be quickly and thoroughly cleaned with water.

It can take some trial and error for pet parents to protect their lawns from the effects of having furry friends playing in the yard.

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GARDEN RETREATS

Choosing a garden style can get overwhelming pretty quickly for anyone, but especially new gardeners. By deciding on "must-have" key elements first, you'll be able to determine what type of perfect space is for you. And if narrowing it down to just one style just doesn't fit the bill, go for a combination of styles! You can adjust any element to create your custom style.

Here are a few styles to help motivate your decision making.



Photo Credit:
Olivia Rose Lowery

Traditional – If you like symmetry and balance, this may be the perfect solution for your yard or garden. Clean walkways, clipped hedges/boxwoods and a balance of trees and shrubs with not a lot of color mixed throughout are what make this the quintessential garden style of older estate homes. You may see cylindrical lined boxwood hedges in the courtyard with a water fountain or large urn as the focal point. The key to this style is keeping it well maintained and trimmed. It is both elegant and sophisticated like the southern plantation's front garden charm.



Photo Credit:
Kelly Comperatore Meeder

Cottage – Here we have a relaxed and sometimes unruly style with an abundance of color. This whimsical garden style is usually overflowing onto pathways to create a soft-edged and fragrant stroll. You can feature items such as arbors & trellises, white picket fences, window boxes, and terra cotta pots. Your imagination can run wild in this garden, literally! Plant poppies, coneflowers, wildflowers, daisies, and sunflowers for a rainbow of colors and have fun experimenting with new varieties of plants. Planting flowers in small groupings is best.



Tropical – This happens to be my favorite style for my patio area where I tend to spend the majority of my spare time. This garden style is very easy to achieve in a small amount of time because you can plant most of the tropical plants in pots and arrange them to give the effect you want to

achieve. Use large-leafed plants like elephant ears (Alocasia and Colocasia), canna and Asiatic lilies, palms, banana trees, ferns, and Mandevilla. I also enjoy adding impatiens for their vibrant colors. Key elements such as stone, pebbles, moving water and the soft lighting of torches or outdoor chimineas will add the dramatic effect of an island paradise right in your backyard.



Photo Credit:
Pat Mattox

Contemplation – Also known as a Zen garden, tracing back to 1300 AD Japan, this is a place for reflecting spiritually and mentally with no distractions. Simple plantings of green moss, grass, rounded shrubs, and airy trees promote relaxation. Stone will represent mountains and raked sand in wavy patterns represents the movement of water. Focal points are statues or stone pagodas. Serenity is the main goal for creating this garden style and can mean different things to everyone, whatever brings peace to you is what you should include in your contemplation garden.

Whether you choose one style or a mixture of several, your garden is YOUR creation and whatever your imagination inspires you to create with your hands. The key is not to mix too many elements and different materials. You can mix several styles but do it purposefully. The best part of gardening is, you can always change or move plants and elements!

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How to keep your lawn looking green

Homeowners' fascination with a lush, green lawn is something that has developed over time and is still "growing" strong. According to a 2019 survey conducted on behalf of the National Association of Landscape Professionals, 81 percent of all Americans had lawns and 79 percent said a lawn is an important feature when buying or renting a property.

Even though lush lawns are still coveted, due to drought, the financial climate and even invading insect populations, many people are taking inventory of their landscapes and deciding if a lawn is a priority, even going so far as to reinvent their spaces with lawn alternatives. Still, there are ways to keep properties green no matter which route is taken. Here's a look at some environmentally friendly ways to address a landscape.

Irrigate from below

There are many ways to water landscapes, but homeowners may want to take their cues from the commercial farming industry. Drip irrigation systems utilize a network

of valves, pipes and tubing close to the roots of plants or under the soil. Such systems are more efficient than surface irrigation options, helping to save water and nutrients in the soil.

Water early

Scotts Lawn Care suggests watering a lawn in the morning before 10 a.m. when it is cooler and winds tend to be calmer. This ensures water can be absorbed into the soil and grass roots before evaporation occurs. Watering midday may cause the water droplets on the lawn blades to heat up and actually scorch the lawn.

Plant a new grass type

Homeowners can experiment with eco-friendly grass seed blends that mix native grasses and may not require as much water nor ideal growing conditions.

Utilize green alternatives

Rather than focusing solely on grass, some homeowners are turning to alternatives like clover and even moss, particularly if their landscapes do not

See **GREEN** on Page 9

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GREEN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

not have the most pristine growing conditions. This may reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and herbicides. The result is still a green, inviting yard.

Watch the lawn height

Mowing too frequently or at too low a height may compromise the lawn's ability to thrive. Grass cut to the proper height develops a deep root system to better locate water and nutrients in the soil. That means homeowners may not have to water as much or as frequently. Taller

lawns also shade the soil and the roots, reducing some evaporation.

Compost

Leave the clippings on the lawn to break down and further feed nutrients to the lawn, helping it look greener and thrive. Furthermore, rely on supplementation with compost to reinforce the nutrient profile in the soil. The National Resources Defense Council says composting is the natural process of recycling organic matter, such as leaves and food scraps, into a valuable fertilizer. It doesn't take much to nurture compost in a yard.

Green landscapes are possible with a few tips that help conserve water and maximize natural resources.



4 ways to make your garden more successful

Homeowners enjoy gardening for many different reasons. In addition to adding beauty to a property, gardens can offset grocery costs by yielding tasty produce. They also offer important habitats and food sources for both insects and animals.

1. Start small.

You may have visions of an expansive garden growing rows of crops or acres of flowers. But it is smart to start small and build on what you find successful, which includes plants that thrive in your lawn and garden. This also is beneficial if you are unsure of vegetable yields. Several blooming plants producing bushels of crops can be overwhelming, especially if you can't get to harvesting or cooking them in a timely fashion.

2. Assess the soil.

Plants need nutrient-rich soil to encourage extensive root systems and produce strong, hardy plants. Nourish soil with organic matter, such as manure, compost, shredded leaves, and natural mulch. Add this organic matter in the off-season to give it enough time to be incorporated into the ground before spring. You can have your soil tested for pH and other characteristics that make it friendly or averse to plants at a local garden center.

3. Arm yourself with knowledge.

Do you know how deeply to plant seeds and how far apart to space plants? Are you aware of the sunlight needs of certain flowers or plants? If not, read the packaging and do your research so your plants have the best chance of not only sprouting, but also surviving. Many people prefer to start seedlings indoors in late winter and then transfer those plants outdoors when they are stronger and more established.

4. Use rainwater.

Rainwater contains fewer contaminants and additives than tap water, which can benefit garden plants. Collect rainwater in rain barrels and use irrigation systems to deliver it to the garden. Home gardens can yield many gifts, from flowers to fruit. Beginners can utilize some time-tested strategies to increase their chances of planting a successful garden.

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His son, James M. Potocnie, worked with his father for years and eventually became sole proprietor. The third generation, Michael and his younger brother Andrew, are a part of the company, working in sales for 20 and 18 years, respectively.

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"If you are interested in a pellet stove or fireplaces, then head on to Alburdis and visit K.C. Stoves. Keith and his staff are courteous, knowledgeable and deliver what they promise. They have tolerated all my questions. If you purchase pellets or stove maintenance in the "off season", the discounts are quite appealing." -Kris B.

"Moved to PA in August 2019 and decided at that time to be prepared for winters here. Updated the firebox with a propane Heatilator brand fireplace, total replacement. Couldn't be happier 6 months later. Kevin, his installer and tileman team, did an excellent all-around job. Following KC's informative pros & cons advice, as to proper size, desires and aesthetics, this was a happy Welcome to Pennsylvania decision." -C. Basso

"I have a pellet stove now for 10 years. Every time I need parts & supplies I go to KC stoves. They always have plenty of supplies & parts in stock. Their prices are good. The people that work there are nice & friendly and knowledgeable. I shop around for the best price on supplies & parts and most of the time KC has the best price. One important thing to remember: Every time I went to KC for something THEY HAD IT IN STOCK. A lot of the other stove places around (I've been to all of them) don't have stuff in stock. They try to BS you why they don't have it in stock and they can order it for you. I don't know about the rest of you but when my stove is down and I need a part or something else, I WANT IT NOW, not tomorrow or next week or whenever. If I didn't want it right away and want to do business like that I would stay home in my house and just order it online. That's why I go to KC Stoves. They are A #1 in my book." -Mike

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Outdoor plants toxic to household pets

Pets bring many positive changes to households. Pets can make homes more lively, and the companionship of animals can reduce feelings of loneliness while offering additional health benefits to pet owners.

Individuals who are preparing to adopt or purchase pets need to be mindful that they may need to make changes at home to ensure residences are safe places for pets to reside. Much in the way new parents must assess the environs for potential hazards to babies, pet owners should conduct similar inspections. These safety checks should occur both inside and in the yard if pets will be spending time outdoors. Poisonous plants are a potentially hidden hazard prospective pet owners must address before bringing a new pet home.

People generally do not give much

thought to the plants they include in their homes and yards beyond the care instructions and how they can add to the aesthetic appeal. Homeowners may know if a plant likes the sun or shade, but they may not realize its potential for toxicity. That's because adults in particular are not prone to ingesting the plants in their yard that are inedible, unlike curious pets that may sniff and nibble plants when exploring their environments. For those with dogs and cats that will spend time outdoors, it's best to be aware of these potentially toxic plants, courtesy of the ASPCA, Dr. Buzby's and Garden Design.

• Autumn crocus:

There are various types of crocus plants, but the one most toxic to dogs is autumn crocus. The entire plant is toxic, but the highest concentration of

toxic agent is found in the bulbs.

• Sago palm:

People in warm climates may enjoy the look of palm trees on their properties. Despite its tropical and relaxing appearance, the Sago palm is extremely poisonous if ingested by pets, with the seeds being the most toxic part.

• Lily:

Lilies are highly toxic to cats in particular. Even grooming pollen off of their fur or drinking water out of a vase where lilies are kept may cause kidney failure.

• Tulips

and hyacinth: These early bloomers are beautiful flowers, but each contains a similar alkaloid toxin that is mild to moderately toxic to pets. Again, the highest concentration is found in the bulbs, which dogs or cats may dig up while exploring.

• Aloe vera:

This soothing succulent may be part of an arid climate landscape. Aloe contains saponin, a toxin with foaming properties that can harm pets if ingested and cause severe dehydration.

• Begonia:

A popular outdoor and houseplant, begonia has decorative flowers and attractive leaves. However, the plant can be toxic to cats and dogs if ingested, particularly the underground tubers.

• Azalea:

This flowering shrub produces flowers in many colors, so it's often



present in household landscapes. It's important to note that azaleas can be toxic to dogs and cats.

• Yew:

American, Canadian and Japanese yew may be found around properties. These shrubs produce small red berries with green centers (almost looking like the reverse of a Spanish olive with pimento). Yew is toxic to cats and dogs.

• Dahlia:

Dahlia produce flowers in different colors, so they are common in flower beds. However, these plants also are mildly toxic to pets.

Many toxic plants can irritate the gastrointestinal system in pets, potentially resulting in vomiting, diarrhea or lethargy. Those who suspect a pet has ingested a poisonous plant should contact the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435 or their local veterinarian to learn about how to respond to possible exposure.




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- **Water at the right times of day.** Homeowners who water their lawns and gardens at the right time of day can help the planet and reduce their energy bills. Watering during the coolest times of the day means less water will be lost to evaporation, ensuring water-needy soil will get all it needs to help lawns and gardens thrive. Early morning watering before the sun reaches its midday peak and/or evening watering as the sun is setting are typically great times to water lawns and gardens, rather than when temperatures are at their hottest.
- **Use a rain barrel.** Rain barrels provide another great way to conserve water while tending to lawns and gardens. Rain barrels collect and store rain water from roofs and downspouts, keeping water from washing into sewage systems where it can't be put to good use. Water collected in rain barrels can be used in various ways. Many homeowners can use water from rain barrels to water their lawns, gardens and houseplants, saving money on their water bills along the way.



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Warning signs of electrical problems

Homeowners know that owning a home provides a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Home ownership also can increase the chances individuals view their homes as a sanctuary where they can relax and enjoy creature comforts they've personally chosen.

The comfort people feel inside their homes can be compromised when they begin to suspect certain safety issues, including electrical problems. The Electrical Safety Foundation estimates that home electrical fires account for roughly 51,000 fires and 500 deaths each year. Electrical problems will not always cause home fires, but it's still wise for homeowners to learn the potential warning signs that something is amiss with their home electrical systems.

• Flickering lights:

Flickering lights are more than a mere nuisance. Bulbs sometimes flicker because they become loose, which can be remedied by turning the fixture off, waiting for the bulb to cool down to the touch and then tightening it. However, if the bulb was already tight when it was flickering, then the ESFI warns this could be a sign of an overloaded circuit. The tech experts at CNET advise homeowners to contact a certified electrician if they suspect their home electrical circuit is overloaded.



• Frequently tripped circuits:

In a day and age when people rely so heavily on electronic devices like routers, desktop computers, tablets, smartphones, and more, a tripped circuit that cuts power to a home can be a major nuisance. But frequently tripped

circuits indicate the presence of an electrical problem that's greater than a sudden shutdown of a computer or disconnected router. Tripping is actually a safety net that shuts down the electrical current of a home in order to let homeowners know something is wrong with their electrical

system. Frequently tripped circuits should be brought to the attention of a licensed electrician, who can identify what's causing the system to alert homeowners something is amiss.

• Warm or discolored wall plates:

It may not be common practice to touch wall

plates, but the ESFI notes this can be a good way to determine if a home is having electrical issues. Discoloration on the wall plates should be enough to draw homeowners' attention. Some wall plates may even appear to be melting. Each of these issues could be a byproduct of various problems, including damaged wiring. A certified electrician can determine what's behind warm and/or discolored wall plates.

• Burning odor emanating from outlets:

The unpleasantness of this warning sign of electrical problems is enough to compel an immediate investigation. Homeowners who detect a burning odor in their homes but aren't sure where it's coming from are urged to inspect their wall outlets. If the odor seems to be coming from an outlet, it could be due to various factors, including exposed wiring, poorly installed wiring, damaged wiring, or a foreign object in the outlet. Contact an electrician immediately if you detect a burning odor coming from an outlet.

Electrical issues in a home pose a serious safety risk. Homeowners should learn the warning signs of such issues and report their presence to a licensed electrician immediately.

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The basics of home inspections

The process of buying a home involves a number of variables that present at various times throughout buyers' search for a home. For instance, real estate professionals typically advise buyers to receive a mortgage preapproval prior to beginning their search for a new home. Once such preliminary measures have been taken care of, buyers can then search for a home and ultimately make an offer.

One of the more critical steps buyers can take when making an offer is insisting that the offer is contingent upon a home inspection. Home inspections offer a measure of protection that can save buyers from investing in properties that may look nice to the naked eye, but feature a host of costly problems beneath the surface. Individuals new to home buying may not know what to expect of the inspection process. In such instances, the following rundown can shed light on home inspections.

- **Recognize inspection may be mandatory.**

Though it's not always the case, home inspections may be required by mortgage lenders. Lenders want to ensure borrowers can repay their loans, which might prove difficult if a home is in need of considerable repairs. That's why home inspections tend to be mandated by lenders, even if they're paid for by buyers. Estimates from HomeAdvisor indicate home inspections cost between \$279 and \$400 on average, but that cost is well worth the peace of mind of knowing you won't unknowingly be buying a money pit.

- **You choose your own inspector.**

Buyers will choose their own home inspector, so it can pay dividends to start asking people you trust for recommendations even before you begin searching for a new home. Realtors also may recommend inspectors they've worked with in the past. The International Association of Certified Home Inspectors® (nachi.org) also can help buyers find a home inspector.

- **You can, and should, attend a home inspection.**

It's wise for buyers to attend a home inspection. Doing so allows them to see potential issues firsthand. Some seasoned home inspectors even prefer clients to attend an inspection so they can point out issues as they go through the house and answer questions



directly rather than later on over the phone or via text or email. Though inspectors typically will answer questions off-site, it's easier for both buyer and inspector to discuss issues in person on the day of the inspection. And for buyers, this can be a great way to become more informed about the home inspection process.

- **Expect to spend a good deal of time at the inspection, and not necessarily with the sellers present.**

The National Association of Realtors indicates inspections can take as long as three hours, so this won't be an in-and-out excursion. Buyers don't want to rush the process, so block out ample time on your schedule to attend the inspection. In addition, sellers typically are not home during an inspection, though it can happen. Buyers who don't want sellers present can request that they are not on the premises while the inspection takes place. There may not be anything to compel sellers to be off-site, but it can't hurt to ask.

Home inspections are a vital component of the home buying process. It's imperative that buyers take inspections seriously so they can feel confident they are not investing in a flawed property.

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What to know about reseeding or replanting your lawn

Spring marks the return of flowering plants and warm weather. And homeowners know that spring also ushers in the return of home renovation season.

Homeowners undoubtedly have an extensive list of projects on their to-do list this spring, and that may include helping their lawns and gardens recover after a long winter. Unpredictable weather, which can include drought and excessive rainfall and everything in between, can take its toll on a lawn. In certain instances, the best solution may be planting new grass. But homeowners can consider these tips before they begin the process of reseeding or replanting their lawns.

• Scarify the lawn.

Scarifying a lawn can help to create a clean slate, but the timing must be right. Various lawn and garden experts, including those at BBC Gardeners' World Magazine, recommend scarifying in spring or early autumn. But don't jump the gun when scarifying in spring by scarifying before the lawn has started to grow after a dormant winter. Scarify when the soil is a little wet and the grass is once again actively growing. Scarifying can remove any lingering weeds from last season and also pull up any moss that might have taken hold over the winter. Without weeds and moss to contend with, freshly planted seeds are in better position to thrive.

• Work with a landscaping professional.

Homeowners with manageable lawns can likely scarify their own lawns with a relatively inexpensive plug-in scarifier. However, scarifying can be a strenuous physical activity, particularly for homeowners with large lawns. In such instances, homeowners can benefit from working with a qualified landscaping professional. Such a professional can scarify the lawn and subsequently reseed or replant new



grass. The latter task is not so simple, as the lawn care experts at Scotts® note that choosing the correct seed is a vital part of reseeding or replanting a lawn. Choosing seed may sound simple, but it's a potentially complex decision that requires knowledge of the existing grass, including when to plant it. Certain grasses are best planted in spring or early fall, while others are best planted


in summer. A qualified landscaping professional can identify the existing grass and plan the seeding or planting around this important detail.

• Prepare to water the lawn.

Watering is vital to the long-term success and health of freshly planted grass seed. Scotts® urges homeowners to keep the top inch of soil consistently moist, but not soggy. That requires a daily commitment, and setting a multi-function hose nozzle or sprinkler to the mist setting once per day or more if it's hot outside can increase the chances grass will grow in thick and strong. Scotts® recommends keeping the top two inches of the soil moist until the new grass reaches a mowing height of roughly three inches. Once that benchmark has been reached, watering frequency can be cut back to about twice per week, but now the soil should be deeply soaked instead of misted. The soaking will help roots grow deep into the soil.

Spring is a great time for homeowners in various regions to reseed or replant their lawns. With the right approach, homeowners can enjoy a full and lush lawn throughout summer.

Smoke Alarms at Home



Smoke alarms are a key part of a home fire escape plan. When there is a fire, smoke spreads fast. Working smoke alarms give you early warning so you can get outside quickly.

FACTS

- A closed door may slow the spread of smoke, heat, and fire.
- Smoke alarms should be installed on every level.
- Roughly 3 out of 5 fire deaths happen in homes with no smoke alarms.



National Fire Protection Association
The leading information and knowledge resource on fire, electrical and related hazards





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